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SUBJECT: BULGARIA: REACHING OUT TO THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Ambassador McEldowney highlighted President Obama's Cairo speech in a meeting with Bulgaria's chief Mufti, stressing our determination to establish a new way forward for U.S. relations with the Muslim world. The Ambassador raised ideas for promoting religious tolerance and voiced support for new initiatives to improve the treatment of Muslims in Bulgaria. The Mufti cautioned about increasing intolerance toward Muslims here, noting that cases of ethnic and religious friction are on the rise. The Mufti agreed with the Ambassador on the importance of launching an interfaith dialogue and reaching out to the new government once Bulgaria concludes its July 5 national elections. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) The Ambassador met with Bulgaria's chief Mufti, Dr. Hadji, on June 5, showcasing the President's Cairo speech and underscoring U.S. commitment to a healthy and positive relationship with Muslims. The Mufti readily accepted the path-breaking initiative by the President, and was grateful we met with him on the same day as the speech. Before the speech, his spokesperson said that the tone of the new Administration toward Muslims was a significant improvement and that it positively impacted Muslims in Bulgaria. Hadji raised Bulgaria's unique circumstances. He represents a Muslim community in Bulgaria of over 1 million (around 10-15% of the population) including ethnic Turks, Roma and Pomaks (ethnic Bulgarians converted to Islam during the Ottoman period). He noted that the enduring presence of these communities in Bulgaria leads many to cite 'the Bulgarian ethnic model' as a multiethnic success in the Balkans. But he cautioned that ethnic and religious tensions, as seen in the 1980's violent campaign to force ethnic Turks to take on Slavic names, are not yet fully resolved.

¶3. (SBU) Hadji warned that negative attitudes in the media and by politicians towards Muslims have increased as the July 5 election date nears. The nationalist Ataka party, as one example, regularly makes very offensive remarks about Muslims, yet little is done to reign in or condemn their hate-speech. While such political speeches will likely decrease after the elections, the damage to the image of Muslims will remain. He added that there have been over 100 attacks and acts of vandalism against mosques in the last two years but no suspects have been charged or arrested. The impunity with which people can insult Muslims and damage property and the authorities' indifference causes great concern.

¶4. (SBU) The Ambassador recommended several ways to promote tolerance and reduce discrimination towards Muslims, notably organizing an inter-faith dialogue. If done early with the new government, such a meeting could be a strong positive symbol. The Mufti agreed, looking forward to a sustained dialogue with us to pursue additional initiatives to improve the treatment of Muslims in Bulgaria. Positive developments here would help shape Muslim attitudes towards the West and the U.S.  
McEldowney